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ABSTRACT

This brochure, intended for the parents of current and prospective French immersion students, answers commonly-asked questions about immersion education, including who should participate, how good the child's French will be, whether immersion students are likely to lose ground in English or academic subjects, how parents can provide support at home, whether children should ever be transferred out of immersion, availability of resource assistance in immersion programs, and choice of early vs. late immersion program. An order form for other publications by Canadian Parents for French, a national network of volunteers in support of French language learning and use, is included. (Contains 24 references.) (MSE)

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CPF *Canadian Parents for French*

FRENCH IMMERSION IN CANADA

Dr. André A. Obadia

Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

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CPF Canadian Parents for French

FRENCH IMMERSION IN CANADA

FAQs

Frequently asked questions

What is the French immersion program?

French immersion is a Canadian-made educational program in which a child whose first language is not French studies in French. Begun 30 years ago in response to parental demand, research shows that French immersion is the most effective way for a child to become functionally bilingual.

Programs are named for their entry points:

- Early French immersion starts not later than Grade 1
- Middle French immersion starts in Grade 3 or later
- Late French immersion starts in Grade 6 or later

Ideally, in French immersion programs all activities and learning during the elementary grades, except for English language arts, are in French.

What is Canadian Parents for French?

Founded in 1977, Canadian Parents for French (CPF) is the national network of volunteers who promote and create opportunities for young Canadians to learn and use French. With approximately 200 chapters across the country, CPF offers concerned adults the opportunity to work with others who are committed to enhancing the quality of French second-language education.

Introduction

Canada's French immersion programs have attracted positive attention from many countries around the globe. For the last decade some countries, particularly in Europe and the United States, have been offering immersion programs often patterned on the Canadian model.

This report provides answers to some of the questions most frequently asked by parents of French immersion students (actual and prospective). This report, we hope, will also give parents a quick overview of a Canadian educational success story. The answers are based on the results of three decades of research about one of the most thoroughly studied educational programs in Canada.

It is rewarding to see that our education system has succeeded, for the first time in the history of second-language teaching in Canada, in giving English-speaking and other students for whom French is a third or fourth language the ability to communicate naturally in French using a wide range of vocabulary.

This high level of French proficiency is developed at no cost to students' English proficiency or to achievement in other academic subjects such as science or mathematics.

Following this report are a list of references and a list of selected CPF resources with an order form.

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* *Dr. André A. Obadia is a Professor at Simon Fraser University (Faculty of Education) in Burnaby, British Columbia. He has published extensively on French immersion programs and has given numerous presentations on French immersion at conferences in Canada and abroad. He is presently conducting a major research project on language immersion programs around the world.*

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FAQs

Frequently asked questions

1 Is French immersion for all children?

French immersion has sometimes been criticized as an elitist program, because, among other reasons, children enrolled in this program tended to come from families with high incomes and the educational level of parents tended to be above average. This criticism may have been valid when the French immersion program began. However, with hundreds of thousands of students in the program, if this was ever true it is not the case today.

Studies have shown that there is no reason why immersion programs should not be suitable for any child. Of course, children with above average academic abilities generally have an advantage in most forms of learning, particularly, in the case of immersion programs, in the development of reading and writing skills. High academic ability, however, is not related to performance in French speaking skills.

By the same token, children with learning difficulties will experience some problems in trying to cope with the French immersion curriculum — the same problems they would encounter in the English-stream program. Learning assistance should be provided to them, whether they are in immersion or in the regular English program. These children (except in rare instances) should not be denied the satisfaction and pride that come from becoming bilingual.

2 How good will my child's French be?

The level of French will vary from one child to another in the same way as performance in mathematics, for example, will vary from child to child. Some students speak French making many mistakes while others might be taken for mother-tongue French speakers.

The language skills of French immersion students are consistently superior to those of core French students (who study French for 20 to 50 minutes per day). In general, immersion students' French oral and reading comprehension skills (receptive skills) will be almost on a par with those of native French speakers. Speaking and writing in the second language (productive skills) may not be as advanced as their comprehension (receptive) skills.

We must remind ourselves that French for these children is, after all, their second language and that English is the predominant language in their environment.

To dwell too much and too critically on the quality of the French spoken by immersion students is often a red herring because it ignores the fact that immersion students not only communicate effectively in French but also learn the skills of communication: selecting the right words with the right nuances, adapting communicative strategies to get the message across, cracking the right joke without making a cultural or linguistic gaffe, and establishing a positive environment by creating a friendly atmosphere with the native speaker.

It will take years of immersion schooling before your child will reach such a level of achievement and comfort in a second language. As an example, imagine yourself being able to understand Chinese spoken by a native speaker at a normal speed and that you are able to communicate, in a normal way, albeit while making some mistakes, with that person. Wouldn't that be wonderful?

French immersion teachers and parents should constantly seek out opportunities for the children to use their French with mother-tongue French speakers. The new technologies (Internet, video-conferencing, multimedia materials, etc.) will help students to establish links with Francophone communities around the world. These opportunities for interaction should help students to improve their sociolinguistic skills.

3 Is my child going to lose out in English or in subjects taught in French?

Research has shown that throughout Canada French immersion students perform at least as well in many aspects of English-language achievement as those who are enrolled in regular programs. Understandably, in the first two or three years (primary grades) of French immersion your child may show some lag in certain areas of English-language skills such as spelling, capitalization, etc. These lags are, however, temporary and usually disappear when English language arts are introduced.

It is not uncommon to see immersion students reading English fluently even though no formal classroom English instruction has yet been introduced. This is due to the phenomenon of transfer of reading skills from French to English. Having the same alphabet makes this process of transfer much easier.

Various studies have shown that immersion students perform as well as English-stream students in all school subjects such as math, science, etc.

4 How can I help at home?

You can start by establishing a good rapport with your child's immersion teacher in a spirit of collaboration and support. Through regular communication with the teacher you should become familiar with the curriculum and be able to help your child as effectively as possible.

At home, your child should be free to read for pleasure in French or in English and be encouraged to talk about his/her experiences at school. Showing interest in what your child is doing at school and providing encouragement and support is of the utmost importance.

For example, you can help by sitting by your child and encouraging him/her to complete his/her work or study his/her lessons. This will help your child in the short and long run. It is particularly easy to work with your child in math, social studies, science or art because they can be done in English at home. Eventually, and as soon as possible, your child will become an independent learner.

Other examples: when there is a "dictée" (spelling exercise) to practise, and if your pronunciation is reasonably good, you may ask the child to say the words to you first and then repeat the words so your child can spell them. It is often an amusing exercise when your child tries to teach you how to pronounce French words. You can transcribe words phonetically to remember how to pronounce them. You may also wish to ask the immersion teacher to record one or more "dictées" to practise at home or your child can make the recording and you can play back the tape. Your child can work using the teacher's voice.

For more information about how you can help, please see the list of selected CPF resources at the end of this report.

5 Should a child ever be transferred out of French immersion?

Except in unusual circumstances, transferring a child out of immersion is generally not advisable. Performing below grade level or grade average, for example, is not a valid reason for transferring your child. In all likelihood the child would not be performing much better if he or she were in an English-stream program.

Transferring a child out of French immersion should be a decision that is made first of all by parents, usually in consultation with the immerson teacher and the school staff. Especially at the elementary level, guidance may be provided by a school-based team generally made up of the French immersion teacher, the English teacher, the counsellor and the learning assistance teacher.

Please remember that in the English stream, where there is no alternative, the child with learning difficulties must stay in his/her program. The existence of this option of transferring the child out of immersion sometimes encourages a parent to transfer the child too hastily. Apart from some extreme cases, children with learning difficulties should not be denied the right and privilege of becoming bilingual and also should be able to draw satisfaction and pride from understanding and speaking two world languages.

6 Is there learning assistance in French immersion?

The level of learning assistance, whether in English-stream or French immersion programs, varies from school district/board to school district/board and sometimes from school to school. Depending on the available resources, children who are in need of learning assistance in French immersion should normally receive the same level of help as that available in the English stream.

Teachers should work in co-operation with the learning assistance teacher to provide help based as much as possible on a child's particular learning style. Parents are encouraged to participate in the process if it will help the child.

7 Should I register my child in Early immersion or Late immersion?

It is estimated that about 80% of all French immersion students are enrolled in early immersion programs. The popularity of this program can be explained by many factors.

1. Studies have shown that it is easier and more "natural" for a child to learn another language at a very early age. In Finland, for example, a Swedish immersion program is offered to children at the age of three.
2. Early French immersion teachers are very conscious of the fact that at first children do not understand the language. The teachers provide clear explanations using various communications strategies and by making experiential activities meaningful.
3. Research has shown the positive results of language immersion programs in Canada and other countries.

While it is "natural" for children to learn French in very early immersion programs (kindergarten), it requires motivation to work much harder when immersion starts in later grades (grade 6 or 7). Students in these grades will want their opinion to count in the decision to enter the French immersion program and the decision will be dependant on their attitude to, ability in and perception of French.

Results of Late immersion programs (with some differences in favour of Early immersion) have been positive.

The author wishes to thank Kate Merry, the President of CPF, for her help with this report.

For more information about French immersion in Canada, please consult the list of references and the list of selected CPF resources that follows.

CPF *Canadian Parents for French*

Order Form

- ☐ Yes, I want an order form for CPF resources
- ☐ Yes, I want information about membership in CPF
- ☐ Yes, I want _____ copies of French Immersion in Canada: FAQs

  Copies of this report are available: members $3.50 (1-4 copies)
  $3.25 (5+ copies)
  (GST is included in all prices.)
  non-members $5.00 (1-4 copies)
  $4.50 (5+ copies)

- ☐ I enclose payment of $ _____
  (Please pay by cheque, money order or purchase order, payable to CPF)
  CPF Membership No. _____
- ☐ Please charge my credit card ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard

Account No. _____ Expiry Date: _____

Name: _____
(please print)

Signature: _____

- ☐ Please send me an invoice

Please send my order to:

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____

_____

Tel. No.: _____ Fax No.: _____

E-mail address: _____

Please send your order form to:

Canadian Parents for French
309 Cooper Street, Suite 210,
Ottawa, Ontario K2P 0G5
Tel (613) 235-1481; Fax (613) 230-5940
E-mail: cpf@omnimage.ca

Membership in CPF is open to individuals and families who support French second-language learning. Join CPF today and add your voice to the thousands of Canadians who are already members of CPF.

Selected CPF Resources

The following CPF publications and resources are likely to be of interest to you:

PAMPHLETS

French Immersion Q & A

Your Child, You and French

Core French Q & A

Choosing a French Program

Why Learn French?

Informational easy-to-read pamphlets designed for parents making choices about FSL education.

SPECIAL REPORTS

Immersion and the New Core French: A Dynamic Partnership (1993)

Explores the impact that French immersion programs have had on the delivery of core French programs and how core and immersion can work together.

VIDEOS

Proud of Two Languages (1995)

CPF's newest video showcasing graduates of a variety of French immersion programs who talk about their experiences.

Please use the order form to request further information about these and other CPF resources.

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